

Blind spots in Belgian Flood Risk Emergency Response

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Objectives and Methods

What are the weaknesses and blind spots, but also the major strengths and opportunities related to multi-level flood risk governance in Belgium?

How? Qualitative approach - (critical) discourse analysis

By conducting semi-directed interviews of major stakeholders (decision-makers from federal to local policy level, NGOs and citizen associations, citizens; N=30)

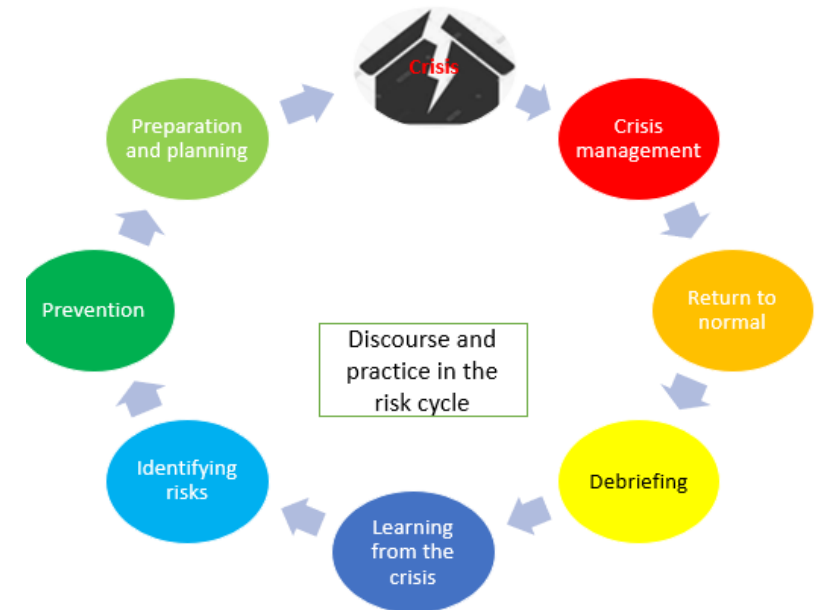
By analyzing discourses and speeches of stakeholders at events at conferences, congresses, meetings...(N=30)

By assessing existing grey literature, recommendations, public and private initiatives at various political levels.

5 major blind spots in the risk cycle: 1. “Unprecedented” event - Undefined “Crisis” issue



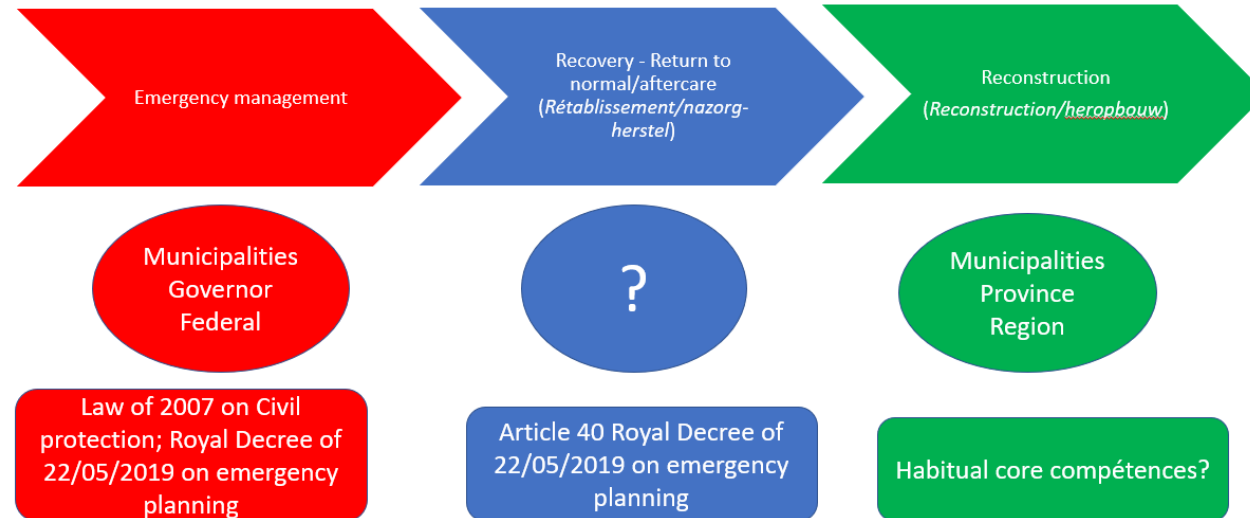
- **‘Unprecedented’ event** = general discourse of citizens, policymakers and politicians
 - Since the middle of the 19th century, the biggest disaster identified is the flooding of the Meuse in 1880, with 12 victims (Deforge, 2021).
 - Tubize (November 2010 - about 30 million euros of damage).
 - Vesdre Valley (July 2021-39 dead- about 3 billion Euros of damage - 109 municipalities affected to varying degrees in Wallonia)
- **Undefined “Crisis” issue - mixing up notions of emergency situations, crisis situations and exceptional situations**
 - Only “emergency situation” (too narrowly) defined, but
 - insufficient to manage off-framework crises (long duration, more institutional partners, major impact on the areas affected; exceed the available means in terms of rescue and intervention).



2. The 'return to normal' phase (RD 22/05/2019)

= *unthinkable part of emergency planning systems - rarely included in emergency and response plans.*

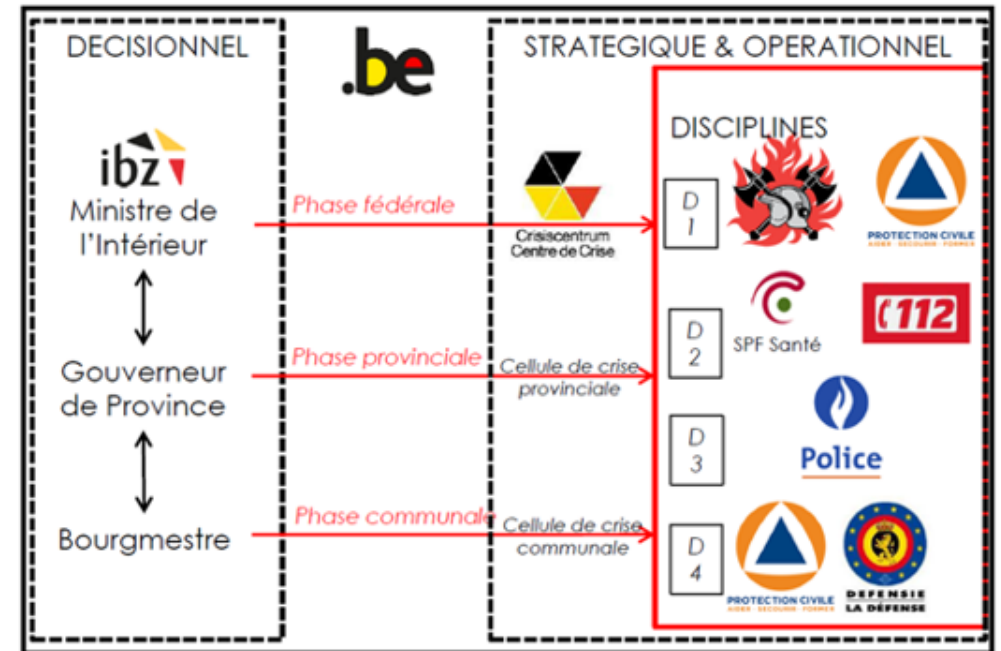
- **Yet**, "After a piece of Mozart, the silence that follows is still Mozart" - When one has just heard a piece of Mozart, the silence that follows is still his (Sacha Guitry).
- Coordination issues between regional and federal level (despite art. 40 - "outdated national emergency planning")
- "need for codification project" (NCCN) : reviewing the legal basis of emergency planning and crisis management + anchor a number of principles that are actually commonplace in legislative texts.



3. Belgium - A (very/too?) complex federal country

- Complicated distribution of competences (“Institutional lasagna”) - difficult to know who does what?
- Issue of dispersed responsibility – insufficient integration and exchange - silo-thinking – both vertical (federal, regional, provincial, local) and horizontal (between departments at same level)
- Unclear role of regional level in emergency planning (e.g. Walloon crisis center not mentioned in R D 2019 on emergency planning)
 - Emergency planning – coordination at federal level
 - Recentralization of competences at regional level in FRM (broader – inc. prevention,...)
- “Command in control” and “subsidiarity” principles - naturally puts the **local or provincial level** at the core of the operations + federal level keeping these levels together with a coordinating overview.
- Part of a *particular system in Belgium – 3 strategic ‘phases’, 5 operational ‘Disciplines’*
- **Confusion between strategic and operational management** – does not correspond with reality on the field (esp. issue for long-term FRM)

Distribution of compétences – RD 22.05.2019



4. Lack of risk culture in Belgium

- ...= general assessment by all stakeholders, so from blind spot to enlightening opportunity ?
- Risk analysis (since 6 years EU obligation) should be baseline for longer term, structural and climate-proof policies – “quod non, hic et nunc” (most respondents)
- Underfunded and under-resourced emergency response sector, despite risk assessment reports
 - = result of the cuts/restructuring of civil protection (D4), budgetary restrictions in health (D2), budgetary restrictions in defence (esp. in 2014) – cf. interview federal emergency officer (NL + Austria –deployed in BEL twice as much capacity ...).
 - In general, lack of training and exercises, as well as the absence of a reference framework supporting the organization of the latter.
 - Feedback, which is intended to promote learning and coordination, is rarely organized and analyzed in a multidisciplinary manner.
- *Yet... proven positive role for international simulation trainings (within UCPM, cf. interviews)*

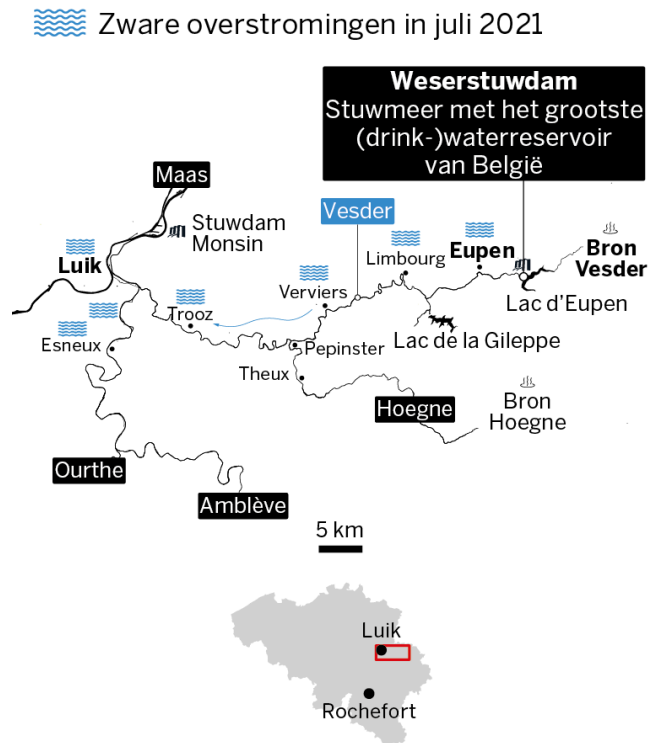
5. Citizen involvement – discrepancies between discourse and practice

General policy discourse of citizen engagement and individual responsibilities

- **For which purpose ?**
 - **Increased individual resilience + closing the expectation gap (from citizens towards the ‘perfect’ governments in Belgium) ?**
 - **Communication issue** - subject to increased attention of policymakers (‘Discipline 5’).
 - Gov’t also blamed for lack of information or **unuseful info**– also local authorities unsatisfied: useful info (warnings) is different from a sprinkled alert by federal (RMI) and regional institutions (DGH, CRC-W,...).
 - >< Discourse on individual responsibilities of citizens and their involvement in FRM (“floodable citizens”- insurance issues, volunteering alert launchers,...)
 - **Yet, on the field, for example, difficulties in managing and coordinating huge volume of voluntary helpers and massive donations**
 - Many (transboundary) volunteers and “mountains of donations in affected areas” (= expression of the mutual aid and solidarity of the Belgians),
 - But: very hard/impossible to manage for local authorities – need for coordination plan (+ responsible C-PLANU)
- ☒ (Partial) dissatisfaction of affected people with state-led support
- “The rain also flushed away the trust in politics” (citizen in Vesdre valley, May 2022)

*After a collective interview
in a café in Pepinster
(Vesdre Valley, Wallonia,
Belgium), I received a T-
Shirt with the inscription:
We drawnd...and the
State has forgotten us !
(« Nous nous sommes
noyés...Et l'Etat nous a
oubliés! Liège Province de
Sinistrés »)*

- Collective and individual interviews with affected citizens in a local bar (Pepinster, 15/06/2022)



Conclusion

- “General fuzziness in Belgium” - due to the “institutional lasagna”, a very complex, multi-layered, federal system – who does what?
 - For emergency response: no clear oversight, who is the commander in control?
- Impacted citizens : From high expectations to much disillusion – increased distrust towards politics
 - Gap between expectations towards the government from the impacted citizens and **actual capacity** of governments to intervene quickly and strongly prevent/reduce risks
- Yet, many ‘slow’ initiatives behind the scene (policy expert groups on risk management, academic studies, Task Force and Master Plan Vesdre due for start 2023,...)
 - = Issues relate partly to a timing/temporality issue (fast response and solutions needed, while recovery policies are slow)
 - They concern directly **central Sendai Framework priority areas**
- After weak prevention and preparedness, a strong recovery?



Thank you for your
attention!

Any questions, please?